



Yale College Council  
Dietary Restrictions  
Accommodations  
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## INTRODUCTION

Yale Dining is one of the most pervasive elements of students' experiences writ large, rivaled by the Residential College system and academics as a whole. Most students will have most of their meals -- and thus nutrition -- for several years provided by Yale Dining. This report will investigate a potential weak spot in Yale Dining: how well it provides nutritional and enjoyable meals to the many students who have involuntary dietary restrictions, herein called allergies. This report will not detail the experiences of students who choose to eat vegetarian or vegan meals, and instead will focus on students who face health complications if their food is not up to par.

This report was written by Benito Flores, Trumbull College Class of 2020, who himself has Celiac Disease and is gluten-free.

## BACKGROUND

The most common food allergens are milk, eggs, peanuts, tree nuts, soy, gluten, fish, and shellfish, with sesame becoming more and more common. Sensitivity to food allergens varies widely -- some allergies result in mild itching or hives, while others result in anaphylactic reactions accompanied by difficulty breathing and hospitalization. People with Celiac Disease, one of the most predictable of food allergies, are supposed to avoid foods with more than 20 PPM<sup>1</sup> of gluten.

Additionally, food allergies are becoming more and more common, increasing by 100% in the last two decades, with more than 50% of allergies only beginning in adulthood.<sup>2</sup> Young adults who have never had to deal with restrictions before may find adjustment difficult.

## PEER INSTITUTIONS

One of the most progressive institutions with regards to allergen accommodation is Stanford. It has partnered with Food Allergy Research & Education, the world's largest non-profit for food allergies which has begun partnering with universities in the US to accommodate students. Stanford has made several strides forward<sup>3</sup>: they

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<sup>1</sup> <https://celiac.org/fast-facts-fda-gluten-free-labeling-rule/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://acaai.org/almost-half-food-allergies-adults-appear-adulthood>

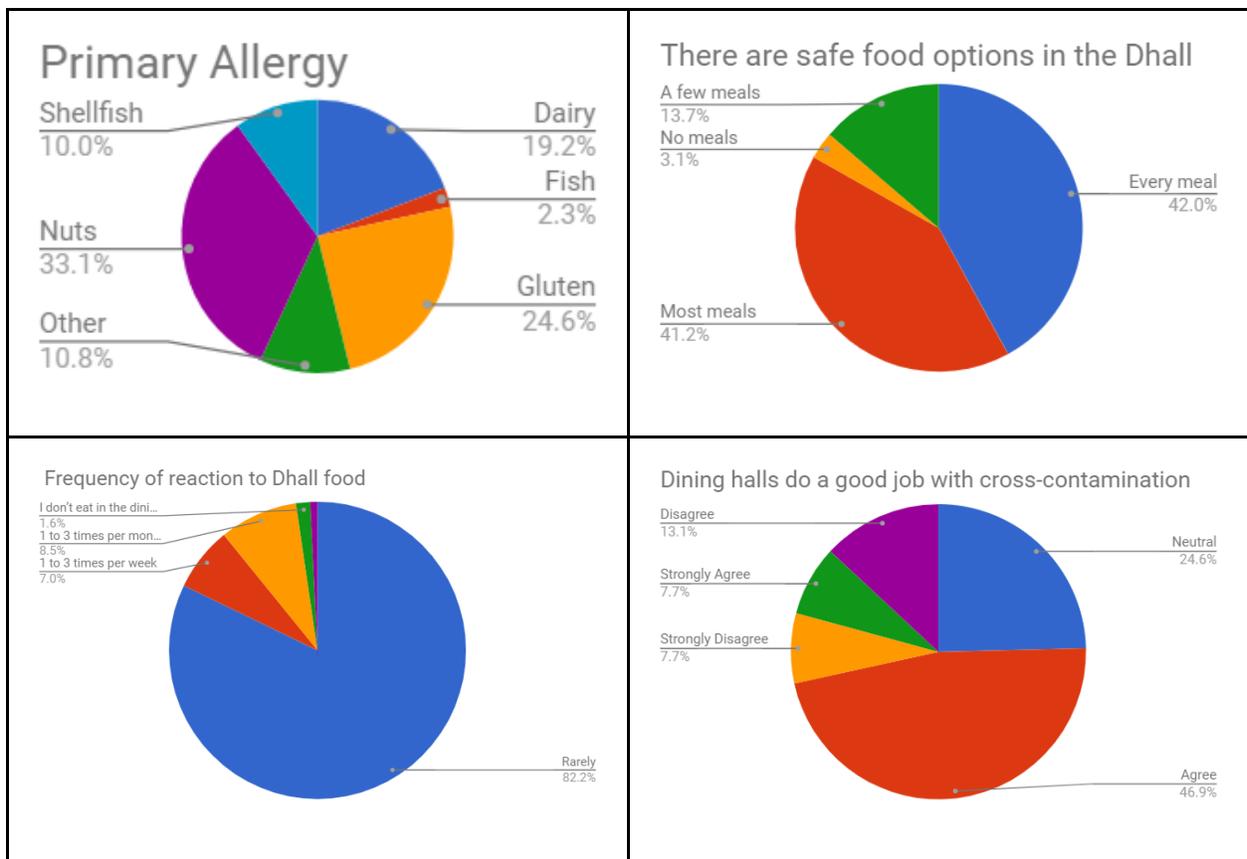
<sup>3</sup> <https://rde.stanford.edu/dining/food-allergies>

offer nutritionist support (and easy access to the information about it) for planning proper meals for students with allergies, and have designated one of their dining halls nut free, so that those students will never have to worry about going into anaphylactic shock.

From conversing with students in the focus group, and the author’s personal experience visiting colleges in the last several years, many state schools and other private schools such as Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute have instituted allergy-friendly kitchens in each dining area. Students with allergies can swipe into these kitchens, which are stocked with frozen or shelf-stable foods that fit the needs of most students. There are dedicated appliances in there for their use as well.

## DATA ANALYSIS

### Student Feedback via Fall 2017 Survey



Based on the data, it seems that students with allergens generally respect the efforts of dining hall staff -- several respondents mentioned in their comments that allergen training for staff might be helpful, but the culture of Yale Dining's chefs and other workers motivates them to try their best. According to the YCC Fall 2017 Survey, 82% of respondents report that they "rarely" have an allergic reaction to dining hall food. For most students with allergies, rarely having reactions is a good benchmark to hit, and cross-contamination is perceived to be dealt with very well within the restraints of the system. The most important criticism that can be gleaned from the data, put into the context of the comments given by students which are detailed more heavily in the next section, is the array of options. 58% of students responded that there were some meals at which they felt they had no good options. A student told me last year that they paid "\$15 for the privilege of preparing gluten-free toast and hoping no one had contaminated the gluten-free butter," referring to a particularly frustrating dinner. In my own personal experience as a student with Celiac Disease, dining hall meals that don't have good options usually contain food that easily could be made allergen-friendly. I often go off-campus to find safe food or eat food stored in my room for whenever the dining hall does not meet my allergen needs.

### ***Student Feedback via Focus Group and Emailed Responses***

Our focus group featured one student who has multiple allergies. His testimony concerned ways he felt his needs could be easily met with simple solutions, many of which were also independently suggested by other participants. Additionally, several Celiac students responded anonymously that they experience serious reactions from dining hall food several times a week, even with precautions taken.

Most of the focus group and survey feedback was full of praise for the efforts of the dining hall staff. In many colleges, kitchen managers try to provide the students with the option to email in requests for food, so as to pull aside food before it goes out and risks cross contamination. However, some students reported that having to plan meals far in advance can be socially limiting, preventing them from joining their peers for quick meals because they already must go to a specific dining hall.

The Silliman dining hall was praised for being very accommodating to gluten-free students, preparing special pancakes or French toast to match whatever was being served with the hot breakfast that day. This points to the disparity between dining

halls, as not all halls are as providing for students with allergies who need extra options.

Many students also pointed out that some dishes are needlessly made less friendly than they could be. Soy sauce, for example, is frequently found without wheat in it, and yet every dish involving soy sauce at Yale is not gluten-free. Many dishes (such as desserts and pizza) could be made vegan (and thus safe for dairy, eggs, fish, and shellfish) and would be enjoyed not only by allergic students but also by the large population of vegans at Yale.

A major complaint was that the solution of many dining hall managers is to have students send them a list of what they would like to eat for the week ahead, based on planned menus. The benefit of this approach is that food can be set aside in the warmer and does not need to go out onto the buffet tables and risk cross-contamination. However, this places severe restrictions on students. For one, they must know what, where, and when they will eat for every meal a week in advance. Most students decide those things a few minutes before eating, and can go to whichever dining hall is most convenient for them at that moment in time. Students who have already requested food feel obligated not to waste it, and so go to their college's dining hall regardless of circumstance. For gluten-free students, ice cream is only safe if it comes from the kitchen, because of the crumbs from cones that drop into the containers. However, containers from the kitchen are kept in deep freeze until they are ready to be used, meaning that the student must know ahead of time that they will have ice cream. I personally watched a staff member snap a metal spoon in half when attempting to get me ice cream; since then, I haven't had ice cream from Yale Dining because I don't want to cause property damage and I don't want to pick my ice cream days in advance.

## SUMMARY

There are many accommodations that could be made to vastly increase the quality of food available to many students at Yale, most of which have to do with adjustments to ingredients used.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Quick Fixes: Menu Adjustments

- Soy sauce: There is no need to use soy sauce containing gluten, as the taste difference is negligible. Soy sauce with gluten is used in most Asian-style dishes of Yale Dining. This change might add one to two options per day consistently for many students.
- Vegan options: Yale Dining already provides vegan cupcakes, cakes, etc. We recommend expanding the vegan options, especially to pizza, and making them more of a regular occurrence than they currently are. This will help multiple allergen groups, as well as be enjoyed by the large number of vegans on Yale's campus.
- Salads: Many of the prepared salads in the salad bars offer cheeses or nuts; it would be more accommodating if cheese and nuts were kept in a small container near the salad so that students could add their own if they desired. This would be similar to the parmesan cheese kept separate from pasta.
- Red lentil pasta: This wheat pasta substitute is occasionally served to the Yale campus as a whole, so making it the default or using it more frequently would accommodate more students.
- Fish and sesame oils: Very few people are allergic to olive or vegetable oil, or other similar alternatives. Using these more common and less allergenic oils will make the entire kitchen safer for students with those allergies.

### Long-Term Fixes

- Adjust menus to be more accommodating: For example, sesame oil and fish oil may be used in more dishes than necessary.
- Be more consistent: Davenport always has gluten-free snickerdoodle cookies, so gluten-free students often go there to have a dessert they know they can eat. Most dining halls have very different offerings in the gluten-free sections, making it difficult to go to any dining hall on a whim. Many facilities do not have allergy-friendly butter and peanut butter, which can be a setback to a student desiring these options.

- Various new options: For example, sorbet could be an easy alternative for ice cream, since sorbet is good for dairy-free students. Additionally, it would be beneficial to keep small packages of ice cream in the student-accessible freezers for gluten-free students, as the ice creams are always contaminated by crumbs from the cones.
- Allergen-free location: Create a space somewhere on campus that has premade frozen meals that is accessible only to students with allergies, so that they can always find something.
- Allow students to double swipe for every meal: Sometimes colleges don't serve everything the app says they will, and students with allergies can't go somewhere else to find food they can eat.
- Clean the fryers more often: Many students with allergies to fish, shellfish, peanuts, sesame, and gluten have been told to avoid anything that was in a fryer for their safety, because the fryers are always contaminated. This is not ideal, especially when things coming from the fryer are otherwise allergen-friendly and would be part of the student's meal.